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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

**South Dakota says goodbye to the 109th Engineer Group**

*Story by Duke Doering*

The transformation of the South Dakota National Guard continues into September as another Rapid City unit is being reorganized. The 109th Engineer Group, which just recently returned from a one-year deployment in Afghanistan, takes on a new name as the 109th Regional Support Group. The 109th Engineer Group unit, which has a history of quick call-ups for active duty, will be redesignated soon.

On Saturday, Sept. 8, a ceremony at Rapid City will close the books on the unit.

Federally recognized on September 15, 1956, the 109th Engineer Group was organized as the command and control headquarters for the engineer units in the state. At that time they were in command of four engineer battalion units, the 153rd, 211th, 137th and the 109th Engineer Battalion.

Col. William J. Brown of Sturgis, a combat veteran of both WW II and the Korean War, was appointed the first commander. Brown retired on July 5, 1960. Sturgis Brown High School was named after this long-time Sturgis teacher and high school principal.

Another early commander was Theodore Spaulding, a World War II Prisoner of War who was captured in the Philippines in early 1942, survived the Bataan Death march in 1942, and was finally released from the coal mines in Japan in 1945.

Eighteen commanders have held the group commander position, including the current commander, Col. Timothy Reisch, who in his full-time job is the South Dakota Director of Corrections in Pierre.

The command of the group has passed through several well known local residents including Bob Helmer, an insurance agent from Belle Fourche who was commander in 1978 until 1982, and former city council member and local pharmacist Stanley Petrik was commander during the period of 1986-1989.

Raymond Carpenter, currently a two-star general at the National Guard Bureau, commanded the unit in the late 1990's.

When the call to federal active duty came in 2004, Col. Nancy Wetherill was the commander of the 109th Engineer Group. The unit departed Rapid City on April 2, 2004, trained at Fort Carson, Colo., then airlifted to Afghanistan where they arrived on May 15, 2004.

From their base camp, the unit fanned out throughout Afghanistan to plan and supervise construction of roads, airfields, school houses and medical facilities.

According to Sgt. Maj. Tad Auker, "The mission of the Army engineers was to improve the infrastructure the country. We had plumbing, heating, and electrical jobs in addition to the road and drainage improvement."

The one-year tour in the war zone caused the members to be very vigilant when traveling the roads. On November 20, a vicious rocket attack struck the 109th compound, but fortunately, there were no serious injuries.

The unit returned to a "Welcome Home" parade in Rapid City on May 13, 2005.

The unit also mobilized for Desert Storm. The 109th Engineer Group arrived in Saudi Arabia on Jan. 15, 1991. After a brief orientation, the unit moved to a tent compound in the desert on Jan. 24, 1991, where they lived for several months, preparing for the invasion of Iraq and liberation of Kuwait.

Lt. Col. Bucky O'Connor, who was the group's executive officer during the Gulf War, said, "While we were in Saudi Arabia we learned to react to SCUD missiles that were being fired at us as we trained and prepared for the ground war for the liberation of Kuwait. My primary concern was about the troops driving the main highway, Tapline Road, through Saudi Arabia. The civilian drivers seemed to have no regard for speed limits, passing on the right, stopping for red lights or general rules of the road."

Fortunately the unit sustained no fatalities or serious injuries during the Gulf War.

In June 1991, the unit returned home to a heroes welcome by the citizens of Rapid City. Several donated convertibles drove the troops from the airport to the Stevens High School gymnasium for the welcome home ceremony.

National Guard units are dual role, commanded by the governor in peacetime and the president in times of national need. The 109th Engineer Group has been called by the Governor many times. Most recently, the unit supported flood recovery at Hermosa in late August of 2007, where the unit assisted homeowners in the recovery effort. National Guard heavy equipment was used to load debris and transport it to the Rapid City landfill.

Over the years, the unit has supported the fire fighting mission of over a dozen forest fires in the Black Hills National Forest and Custer State Park. Probably the most significant state mission was the call to assist during the disastrous flood in Rapid City and other Black Hills communities on June 9, 1972. Fortunately, the 109th Engineer Group was already in Camp Rapid for the two-

week annual training period. The group, along with the state's transportation units drove their 6X6 trucks throughout the area of Rapid Creek rescuing people and getting them back to safe areas.

The number of lives saved by the National Guard that night was never known for sure, but surely must have been in the hundreds.

The units remained on duty with the city for their following week of its 1972 annual training, using the heavy equipment to search for victims, remove cars and wrecked homes from the creek-bed and grading mud and gravel from the city streets.

So after a rich tradition the well-known 109th Engineer Group will take a new name, 109th Regional Support Group and a change in mission effective Sept. 8, 2007.

“As a part of the overall Army transformation plan, all engineer group headquarters will be eliminated,” said Col. Tim Reisch, 109th Engineer Group commander. “Instead of commanding and controlling engineer units, the new mission of our unit will be focused on providing logistical support.”

In its new mission, the 109th RSG will command two battalion-sized units, the 881st Troop Command located in Sturgis and the 152nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion in Pierre. It will serve as a higher headquarters for 18 units representing about 875 Soldiers in nine communities. Its units specialize in transportation, aviation, aircraft maintenance, medical treatment, firefighting and public affairs.

“These units are particularly valuable resources that can be employed by the governor in response to local emergencies and homeland defense,” said Reisch who also noted the “South Dakota’s own” 147th Army Band will fall under the new command.

If you go....

What: 109th Engineer Group inactivation and redesignation ceremony

When: 2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 8

Where: Range Road Armory, Rapid City

More: The unit will have military and memorabilia displays for viewing all afternoon, beginning at noon. Additional information may be obtained from Command Sgt. Maj. Dan Regan (Retired), (605) 381-7444. E-mail: [regandr@rushmore.com](mailto:regandr@rushmore.com)